



Antigone

By Sophocles (442 B.C.)

Translator's Note

This translation is by Ian Johnston of Malaspina University-College, Nanaimo, B.C. The translator would like to acknowledge the extremely valuable help provided by Andrew Brown's edition of Sophocles' *Antigone* (Aris & Philips, 1987), especially by his editorial notes.

Background Note to the Story

When Oedipus [ED-uh-pus], King of Thebes [THEEBZ], discovered through his own investigations that he had killed his father and married his mother, Jocasta [jo-CAHS-tuh], he put out his own eyes, and Jocasta killed herself. Once Oedipus ceased being king of Thebes, his two sons, Polyneices [PAUL-uh-NICE-eez] and Eteocles [eh-TEE-uh-kleez], agreed to alternate as king. When Eteocles refused to give up power to Polyneices, the latter collected a foreign army of Argives and attacked the city. In the ensuing battle, the Thebans triumphed over the invading forces, and the two brothers killed each other, with Eteocles defending the city and Polyneices attacking it. The action of the play begins immediately after the battle. Note that Creon is Jocasta's brother and thus an uncle of Antigone, Ismene, Eteocles, and Polyneices.

ANTIGONE: [ann-TIG-ahn-ee] youngest daughter of Oedipus

ISMENE: [iz-MAY-nee] daughter of Oedipus, Antigone's sister

CREON: [KREE-ahn] King of Thebes

EURYDICE: [you-RID-iss-ee] wife of Creon

HAEMON: [HAY-eh-mahn] son of Creon and Eurydice, engaged to Antigone

TEIRESIAS: [tair-EE-see-us] an old blind prophet

BOY: a young lad guiding Teiresias

GUARD: a soldier serving Creon

MESSENGER: a servant to the court

CHORUS: Theban Elders

ATTENDANTS: various other court servants

[In Thebes, directly in front of the royal palace, which stands in the background, its main doors facing the audience. Enter Antigone leading Ismene away from the palace]

ANTIGONE Now, dear Ismene, my own blood sister, do you have any sense of all the troubles Zeus keeps bringing on the two of us, as long as we're alive? All that misery which stems from Oedipus? There's no suffering, no shame, no ruin—not one dishonor—which I have not seen in all the troubles you and I go through. What's this they're saying now, something our general has had proclaimed throughout the city? Do you know of it? Have you heard? Or have you just missed the news? Dishonors which better fit our enemies are now being piled up on the ones we love.

ISMENE I've had no word at all, Antigone, nothing good or bad about our family, not since we two lost both our brothers, killed on the same day by a double blow. And since the Argive army, just last night, has gone away, I don't know any more if I've been lucky or face total ruin.

ANTIGONE I know that. That's why I brought you here, outside the gates, so only you can hear.

ISMENE What is it? The way you look makes it seem you're thinking of some dark and gloomy news.

ANTIGONE Look—what's Creon doing with our two brothers? He's honoring one with a full funeral and treating the other one disgracefully! Eteocles, they say, has had his burial according to our customary rites, to win him honor with the dead below. But as for Polyneices, who perished so miserably, an order has gone out throughout the city—that's what people say. He's to have no funeral or lament, but to be left unburied and unwept, a sweet treasure for the birds to look at, for them to feed on to their heart's content. That's what people say the noble Creon has announced to you and me—I mean to me—and now he's coming to proclaim the fact, to state it clearly to those who have not heard. For Creon this matter's really serious. Anyone who acts against the order will be stoned to death before the city. Now you know, and you'll quickly demonstrate whether you are nobly born, or else a girl unworthy of her splendid ancestors.

ISMENE Oh my poor sister, if that's what's happening, what can I say that would be any help to ease the situation or resolve it?

ANTIGONE Think whether you will work with me in this and act together.

ISMENE In what kind of work? What do you mean?

ANTIGONE Will you help these hands take up Polyneices' corpse and bury it?

ISMENE What? You're going to bury Polyneices, when that's been made a crime for all in Thebes?

ANTIGONE Yes. I'll do my duty to my brother—and yours as well, if you're not prepared to. I won't be caught betraying him.

ISMENE You're too rash. Has Creon not expressly banned that act?

ANTIGONE Yes. But he's no right to keep me from what's mine.

ISMENE O dear. Think, Antigone. Consider how our father died, hated and disgraced, when those mistakes which his own search revealed forced him to turn his hand against himself and stab out both his eyes. Then that woman, his mother and his wife—her double role—destroyed her own life in a twisted noose. Then there's our own two brothers, both butchered in a single day—that ill-fated pair with their own hands slaughtered one another and brought about their common doom. Now, the two of us are left here quite alone. Think how we'll die far worse than all the rest, if we defy the law and move against the king's decree, against his royal power. We must remember that by birth we're women, and, as such, we shouldn't fight with men. Since those who rule are much more powerful, we must obey in this and in events which bring us even harsher agonies. So I'll ask those underground for pardon—since I'm being compelled, I will obey those in control. That's what I'm forced to do. It makes no sense to try to do too much.

ANTIGONE I wouldn't urge you to. No. Not even if you were keen to act. Doing this with you would bring me no joy. So be what you want. I'll still bury him. It would be fine to die while doing that. I'll lie there with him, with a man I love, pure and innocent, for all my crime. My honors for the dead must last much longer than for those up here. I'll lie down there forever. As for you, well, if you wish, you can show contempt for those laws the gods all hold in honor.

ISMENE I'm not disrespecting them. But I can't act against the state. That's not in my nature.

ANTIGONE Let that be your excuse. I'm going now to make a burial mound for my dear brother.

ISMENE Oh poor Antigone, I'm so afraid for you.

ANTIGONE Don't fear for me. Set your own fate in order.

ISMENE Make sure you don't reveal to anyone what you intend. Keep it closely hidden. I'll do the same.

ANTIGONE No, no. Announce the fact—if you don't let everybody know, I'll despise your silence even more.

ISMENE Your heart is hot to do cold deeds.

ANTIGONE But I know I'll please the ones I'm duty bound to please.

ISMENE Yes, if you can. But you're after something which you're incapable of carrying out.

ANTIGONE Well, when my strength is gone, then I'll give up.

ISMENE A vain attempt should not be made at all.

ANTIGONE I'll hate you if you're going to talk that way. And you'll rightly earn the loathing of the dead.

So leave me and my foolishness alone—we'll get through this fearful thing. I won't suffer anything as bad as a disgraceful death.

ISMENE All right then, go, if that's what you think right. But remember this—even though your mission makes no sense, your friends do truly love you.

[Exit Antigone away from the palace. Ismene watches her go and then returns slowly into the palace. Enter the Chorus of Theban elders.]

CHORUS O ray of sunlight, most beautiful that ever shone on Thebes, city of the seven gates, you've appeared at last, you glowing eye of golden day, moving above the streams of Dirce,¹ driving into headlong flight the white-shield warrior from Argos, who marched here fully armed, now forced back by your sharper power.

CHORUS LEADER Against our land he marched, sent here by the warring claims of Polyneices, with piercing screams, an eagle flying above our land, covered wings as white as snow, and hordes of warriors in arms, helmets topped with horsehair crests.

CHORUS Standing above our homes, he ranged around our seven gates, with threats to swallow us and spears thirsting to kill. Before his jaws had had their fill and gorged themselves on Theban blood, before Hephaistos'² pine-torch flames had seized our towers, our fortress crown, he went back, driven in retreat. Behind him rings the din of war—his enemy, the Theban dragon-snake, too difficult for him to overcome.

CHORUS LEADER Zeus hates an arrogant boasting tongue. Seeing them march here in a mighty stream, in all their clanging golden pride, he hurled his fire and struck the man, up there, on our battlements, as he began to scream aloud his victory.

CHORUS The man swing down, torch still in hand, and smashed into unyielding earth—the one who not so long ago attacked, who launched his furious, enraged assault, to blast us, breathing raging storms. But things turned out not as he'd hoped. Great war god Ares assisted us—he smashed them down and doomed them all to a very different fate.

CHORUS LEADER Seven captains at seven gates matched against seven equal warriors paid Zeus their full bronze tribute, the god who turns the battle tide, all but that pair of wretched men, born of one father and one mother, too—who set their conquering spears against each other and then both shared a common death.

CHORUS Now victory with her glorious name has come, bringing joy to well-armed Thebes. The battle's done—let's strive now to forget with songs and dancing all night long, with Bacchus leading us to make Thebes shake.

[The palace doors are thrown open and guards appear at the doors]

CHORUS LEADER But here comes Creon, new king of our land, son of Menoikeos [men-OY-kus].

Thanks to the gods, who've brought about our new good fortune. What plan of action does he have in mind? What's made him hold this special meeting, with elders summoned by a general call?

[Enter Creon from the palace. He addresses the assembled elders]

CREON Men, after much tossing of our ship of state, the gods have safely set things right again. Of all the citizens I've summoned you, because I know how well you showed respect for the eternal power of the throne, first with Laius³ and again with Oedipus, once he restored our city. When he died, you stood by his children, firm in loyalty. Now his sons have perished in a single day, killing each other with their own two hands, a double slaughter, stained with brother's blood. And so I have the throne, all royal power, for I'm the one most closely linked by blood to those who have been killed. It's impossible to really know a man, to know his soul, his mind and will, before one witnesses his skill in governing and making laws. For me, a man who rules the entire state and does not take the best advice there is, but through fear keeps his mouth forever shut, such a man is the very worst of men—and always will be. And a man who thinks more highly of a friend than of his country, well, he means nothing to me. Let Zeus know, the god who always watches everything, I would not stay silent if I saw disaster moving here against the citizens, a threat to their security. For anyone who acts against the state, its enemy, I'd never make my friend. For I know well our country is a ship which keeps us safe, and only when it sails its proper course do we make friends. These are the principles I'll use in order to protect our state. That's why I've announced to all citizens my orders for the sons of Oedipus—Eteocles, who perished in the fight to save our city, the best and bravest of our spearmen, will have his burial, with all those purifying rituals which accompany the noblest corpses, as they move below. As for his brother—that Polyneices, who returned from exile, eager to wipe out in all-consuming fire his ancestral city and its native gods, keen to seize upon his family's blood and lead men into slavery—for him, the proclamation in the state declares he'll have no burial mound, no funeral rites, and no lament. He'll be left unburied, his body there for birds and dogs to eat, a clear reminder of his shameful fate. That's my decision. For I'll never act to respect an evil man with honors in preference to a man who's acted well. Anyone who's well disposed towards our state, alive or dead, that man I will respect.

CHORUS LEADER Son of Menoikeos, if that's your will for this city's friends and enemies, it seems to me you now control all laws concerning those who've died and us as well—the ones who are still living.

CREON See to it then, and act as guardians of what's been proclaimed.

CHORUS Give that task to younger men to deal with.

CREON There are men assigned to oversee the corpse.

CHORUS LEADER Then what remains that you would have us do?

CREON Don't yield to those who contravene my orders.

CHORUS LEADER No one is such a fool that he loves death.

CREON Yes, that will be his full reward, indeed. And yet men have often been destroyed because they hoped to profit in some way.

[Enter a guard, coming towards the palace]

GUARD My lord, I can't say I've come out of breath by running here, making my feet move fast. Many times I stopped to think things over—and then I'd turn around, retrace my steps. My mind was saying many things to me, "You fool, why go to where you know for sure your punishment awaits?"—"And now, poor man, why are you hesitating yet again? If Creon finds this out from someone else, how will you escape being hurt?" Such matters kept my mind preoccupied. And so I went, slowly and reluctantly, and thus made a short road turn into a lengthy one. But then the view that I should come to you won out. If what I have to say is nothing, I'll say it nonetheless. For I've come here clinging to the hope that I'll not suffer anything that's not part of my destiny.

CREON What's happening that's made you so upset?

GUARD I want to tell you first about myself. I did not do it. And I didn't see the one who did. So it would be unjust if I should come to grief.

CREON You hedge so much. Clearly you have news of something ominous.

GUARD Yes. Strange things that make me pause a lot.

CREON Why not say it and then go—just leave.

GUARD All right, I'll tell you. It's about the corpse. Someone has buried it and disappeared, after spreading thirsty dust onto the flesh and undertaking all appropriate rites.

CREON What are you saying? What man would dare this?

GUARD I don't know. There was no sign of digging, no marks of any pick axe or a mattock. The ground was dry and hard and very smooth, without a wheel track. Whoever did it left no trace. When the first man on day watch revealed it to us, we were all amazed. The corpse was hidden, but not in a tomb. It was lightly covered up with dirt, as if someone wanted to avert a curse. There was no trace of a wild animal or dogs who'd come to rip the corpse apart. Then the words flew round among us all, with every guard accusing someone else. We were about to fight, to come to blows—no one was there to

put a stop to it. Every one of us was responsible, but none of us was clearly in the wrong. In our defense we pleaded ignorance. Then we each stated we were quite prepared to pick up red-hot iron, walk through flames, or swear by all the gods that we'd not done it, we'd no idea how the act was planned, or how it had been carried out. At last, when all our searching had proved useless, one man spoke up, and his words forced us all to drop our faces to the ground in fear. We couldn't see things working out for us, whether we agreed or disagreed with him. He said we must report this act to you—we must not hide it. And his view prevailed. I was the unlucky man who won the prize, the luck of the draw. That's why I'm now here, not of my own free will or by your choice. I know that—for no one likes a messenger who comes bearing unwelcome news with him.

CHORUS LEADER My lord, I've been wondering for some time now—could this act not be something from the gods?

CREON Stop now—before what you're about to say enrages me completely and reveals that you're not only old but stupid, too. No one can tolerate what you've just said, when you claim gods might care about this corpse. Would they pay extraordinary honors and bury as a man who'd served them well someone who came to burn their offerings, their pillared temples, to torch their lands and scatter all its laws? Or do you see gods paying respect to evil men? No, no. For quite a while some people in the town have secretly been muttering against me. They don't agree with what I have decreed. They shake their heads and have not kept their necks under my yoke, as they are duty bound to do if they were men who are content with me. I well know that these guards were led astray—such men urged them to carry out this act for money. To foster evil actions, to make them commonplace among all men, nothing is as powerful as money. It destroys cities, driving men from home. Money trains and twists the minds in worthy men, so they then undertake disgraceful acts. Money teaches men to live as scoundrels, familiar with every profane enterprise. But those who carry out such acts for cash sooner or later see how for their crimes they pay the penalty. For if great Zeus still has my respect, then understand this—I swear to you on oath—unless you find the one whose hands really buried him, unless you bring him here before my eyes, then death for you will never be enough. No, not before you're hung up still alive and you confess to this gross, violent act. That way you'll understand in future days, when there's a profit to be gained from theft, you'll learn that it's not good to be in love with every kind of monetary gain. You'll know more men are ruined than are saved when they earn profits from dishonest schemes.

GUARD Do I have your permission to speak now, or do I just turn around and go away?

CREON But I find your voice so irritating—don't you realize that?

GUARD Where does it hurt? Is it in your ears or in your mind?

CREON Why try to question where I feel my pain?

GUARD The man who did it—he upsets your mind. I offend your ears.

CREON My, my, it's clear to see it's natural for you to chatter on.

GUARD Perhaps. But I never did this.

CREON This and more—you sold your life for silver.

GUARD How strange and sad when the one who sorts this out gets it all wrong.

CREON Well, enjoy your sophisticated views. But if you don't reveal to me who did this, you'll just confirm how much your treasonous gains have made you suffer.

[Exit Creon back into the palace. The doors close behind him]

GUARD Well, I hope he's found. That would be best. But whether caught or not—and that's something sheer chance will bring about—you won't see me coming here again. This time, against all hope and expectation, I'm still unhurt. I owe the gods great thanks.

[Exit the Guard away from the palace]

CHORUS There are many strange and wonderful things, but nothing more strangely wonderful than man. He moves across the white-capped ocean seas blasted by winter storms, carving his way under the surging waves engulfing him. With his teams of horses he wears down the unwearied and immortal earth, the oldest of the gods, harassing her, as year by year his ploughs move back and forth.

He snares the light-winged flocks of birds, herds of wild beasts, creatures from deep seas, trapped in the fine mesh of his hunting nets. O resourceful man, whose skill can overcome ferocious beasts roaming mountain heights. He curbs the rough-haired horses with his bit and tames the inexhaustible mountain bulls, setting their savage necks beneath his yoke.

He's taught himself speech and wind-swift thought, trained his feelings for communal civic life, learning to escape the icy shafts of frost, volleys of pelting rain in winter storms, the harsh life lived under the open sky. That's man—so resourceful in all he does. There's no event his skill cannot confront—other than death—that alone he cannot shun, although for many baffling sicknesses he has discovered his own remedies.

The qualities of his inventive skills bring arts beyond his dreams and lead him on, sometimes to evil and sometimes to good. If he treats his country's laws with due respect and honors justice by swearing on the gods, he wins high honors in his city. But when he grows bold and turns to evil, then he

has no city. A man like that—let him not share my home or know my mind.

[Enter the Guard, bringing Antigone with him. She is not resisting]

CHORUS LEADER What this? I fear some omen from the gods. I can't deny what I see here so clearly—that young girl there—it's Antigone. Oh you poor girl, daughter of Oedipus, child of a such a father, so unfortunate, what's going on? Surely they've not brought you here because you've disobeyed the royal laws, because they've caught you acting foolishly?

GUARD This here's the one who carried out the act. We caught her as she was burying the corpse. Where's Creon?

[The palace doors open. Enter Creon with attendants]

CHORUS LEADER He's coming from the house—and just in time.

CREON Why have I come "just in time"? What's happening? What is it?

GUARD My lord, human beings should never take an oath there's something they'll not do—for later thoughts contradict what they first meant. I'd have sworn I'd not soon venture here again. Back then, the threats you made brought me a lot of grief. But there's no joy as great as what we pray for against all hope. And so I have come back, breaking that oath I swore. I bring this girl, captured while she was honoring the grave. This time we did not draw lots. No. This time I was the lucky man, not someone else. And now, my lord, take her for questioning. Convict her. Do as you wish. As for me, by rights I'm free and clear of all this trouble.

CREON This girl here—how did you catch her? And where?

GUARD She was burying that man. Now you know all there is to know.

CREON Do you understand just what you're saying? Are your words the truth?

GUARD We saw this girl giving that dead man's corpse full burial rites—an act you'd made illegal. Is what I say simple and clear enough?

CREON How did you see her, catch her in the act?

GUARD It happened this way. When we got there, after hearing those awful threats from you, we swept off all the dust covering the corpse, so the damp body was completely bare. Then we sat down on rising ground up wind, to escape the body's putrid rotting stench. We traded insults just to stay awake, in case someone was careless on the job. That's how we spent the time right up 'til noon, when the sun's bright circle in the sky had moved half way and it was burning hot. Then suddenly a swirling windstorm came, whipping clouds of dust up from the ground, filling the plain—some heaven-sent trouble. In that level place the dirt storm damaged all the forest growth, and the air around was filled with dust for miles. We shut our mouths and

just endured this scourge sent from the gods. A long time passed. The storm came to an end. That's when we saw the girl. She was shrieking—a distressing painful cry, just like a bird who's seen an empty nest, its fledglings gone. That's how she was when she saw the naked corpse. She screamed out a lament, and then she swore, calling evil curses down upon the ones who'd done this. Then right away her hands threw on the thirsty dust. She lifted up a finely made bronze jug and then three times poured out her tributes to the dead. When we saw that, we rushed up right away and grabbed her. She was not afraid at all. We charged her with her previous offense as well as this one. She just kept standing there, denying nothing. That made me happy—though it was painful, too. For it's a joy escaping troubles which affect oneself, but painful to bring evil on one's friends. But all that is of less concern to me than my own safety.

CREON You there—you with your face bent down towards the ground, what do you say? Do you deny you did this or admit it?

ANTIGONE I admit I did it. I won't deny that.

CREON [to the Guard] You're dismissed—go where you want. You're free—no serious charges made against you.

[Exit the Guard. Creon turns to interrogate Antigone]

Tell me briefly—not in some lengthy speech—were you aware there was a proclamation forbidding what you did?

ANTIGONE I'd heard of it. How could I not? It was public knowledge.

CREON And yet you dared to break those very laws?

ANTIGONE Yes. Zeus did not announce those laws to me. And Justice living with the gods below sent no such laws for men. I did not think anything which you proclaimed strong enough to let a mortal override the gods and their unwritten and unchanging laws. They're not just for today or yesterday, but exist forever, and no one knows where they first appeared. So I did not mean to let a fear of any human lead to my punishment among the gods. I know all too well I'm going to die—how could I not?—it makes no difference what you decree. And if I have to die before my time, well, I count that a gain. When someone has to live the way I do, surrounded by so many evil things, how can she fail to find a benefit in death? And so for me meeting this fate won't bring any pain. But if I'd allowed my own mother's dead son to just lie there, an unburied corpse, then I'd feel distress. What's going on here does not hurt me at all. If you think what I'm doing now is stupid, perhaps I'm being charged with foolishness by someone who's a fool.

CHORUS LEADER It's clear enough the spirit in this girl is passionate—her father was the same. She has no sense of compromise in times of trouble.

CREON [to the Chorus Leader] But you should know the most obdurate wills are those most prone to break. The strongest iron tempered in the fire to make it really hard— that's the kind you see most often shatter. I'm well aware the most tempestuous horses are tamed by one small bit. Pride has no place in anyone who is his neighbor's slave. This girl here was already very insolent in contravening laws we had proclaimed. Here she again displays her proud contempt—having done the act, she now boasts of it. She laughs at what she's done. Well, in this case, if she gets her way and goes unpunished, then she's the man here, not me. No. She may be my sister's child, closer to me by blood than anyone belonging to my house who worships Zeus Herkeios in my home,⁴ but she'll not escape my harshest punishment—her sister, too, whom I accuse as well. She had an equal part in all their plans to do this burial. Go summon her here. I saw her just now inside the palace, her mind out of control, some kind of fit.

[Exit attendants into the palace to fetch Ismene]

When people hatch their mischief in the dark their minds often convict them in advance, betraying their treachery. How I despise a person caught committing evil acts who then desires to glorify the crime.

ANTIGONE Take me and kill me—what more do you want?

CREON Me? Nothing. With that I have everything.

ANTIGONE Then why delay? There's nothing in your words that I enjoy—may that always be the case! And what I say displeases you as much. But where could I gain greater glory than setting my own brother in his grave? All those here would confirm this pleases them if their lips weren't sealed by fear—being king, which offers all sorts of various benefits, means you can talk and act just as you wish.

CREON In all of Thebes, you're the only one who looks at things that way.

ANTIGONE They share my views, but they keep their mouths shut just for you.

CREON These views of yours—so different from the rest—don't they bring you any sense of shame?

ANTIGONE No—there's nothing shameful in honoring my mother's children.

CREON You had a brother killed fighting for the other side.

ANTIGONE Yes—from the same mother and father, too.

CREON Why then give tributes which insult his name?

ANTIGONE But his dead corpse won't back up what you say.

CREON Yes, he will, if you give equal honors to a wicked man.

ANTIGONE But the one who died was not some slave—it was his own brother.

CREON Who was destroying this country—the other one went to his death defending it.

ANTIGONE That may be, but Hades still desires equal rites for both.⁵

CREON A good man does not wish what we give him to be the same an evil man receives.

ANTIGONE Who knows? In the world below perhaps such actions are no crime.

CREON An enemy can never be a friend, not even in death.

ANTIGONE But my nature is to love. I cannot hate.

CREON Then go down to the dead. If you must love, love them. No woman's going to govern me—no, no—not while I'm still alive.

[Enter two attendants from the house bringing Ismene to Creon]

CHORUS LEADER Ismene's coming. There—right by the door. She's crying. How she must love her sister! From her forehead a cloud casts its shadow down across her darkly flushing face—and drops its rain onto her lovely cheeks.

CREON You there—you snake lurking in my house, sucking out my life's blood so secretly. I'd no idea I was nurturing two pests, who aimed to rise against my throne. Come here. Tell me this—do you admit you played your part in this burial, or will you swear an oath you had no knowledge of it?

ISMENE I did it—I admit it, and she'll back me up. So I bear the guilt as well.

ANTIGONE No, no—justice will not allow you to say that. You didn't want to. I didn't work with you.

ISMENE But now you're in trouble, I'm not ashamed of suffering, too, as your companion.

ANTIGONE Hades and the dead can say who did it—I don't love a friend whose love is only words.

ISMENE You're my sister. Don't dishonor me. Let me respect the dead and die with you.

ANTIGONE Don't try to share my death or make a claim to actions which you did not do. I'll die—and that will be enough.

ISMENE But if you're gone, what is there in life for me to love?

ANTIGONE Ask Creon. He's the one you care about.

ISMENE Why hurt me like this? It doesn't help you.

ANTIGONE If I am mocking you, it pains me, too.

ISMENE Even now is there some way I can help?

ANTIGONE Save yourself. I won't envy your escape.

ISMENE I feel so wretched leaving you to die.

ANTIGONE But you chose life—it was my choice to die.

ISMENE But not before I'd said those words just now.

ANTIGONE Some people may approve of how you think—others will believe my judgment's good.

ISMENE But the mistake's the same for both of us.

ANTIGONE Be brave. You're alive. But my spirit died some time ago so I might help the dead.

CREON I'd say one of these girls has just revealed how mad she is—the other's been that way since she was born.

ISMENE My lord, whatever good sense people have by birth no longer stays with them once their lives go wrong—it abandons them.

CREON In your case, that's true, once you made your choice to act in evil ways with wicked people.

ISMENE How could I live alone, without her here?

CREON Don't speak of her being here. Her life is over.

ISMENE You're going to kill your own son's bride?

CREON Why not? There are other fields for him to plough.

ISMENE No one will make him a more loving wife than she will.

CREON I have no desire my son should have an evil wife.

ANTIGONE Dearest Haemon, how your father wrongs you.

CREON I've had enough of this—you and your marriage.

ISMENE You really want that? You're going to take her from him?

CREON No, not me. Hades is the one who'll stop the marriage.

CHORUS LEADER So she must die—that seems decided on.

CREON Yes—for you and me the matter's closed.

[Creon turns to address his attendants]

No more delay. You slaves, take them inside. From this point on they must act like women and have no liberty to wander off. Even bold men run when they see Hades coming close to them to snatch their lives.

[The attendants take Antigone and Ismene into the palace, leaving Creon and the Chorus on stage]

CHORUS Those who live without tasting evil have happy lives—for when the gods shake a house to its foundations, then inevitable disasters strike, falling upon whole families, just as a surging ocean swell running before cruel Thracian winds across the dark trench of the sea churns up the deep black sand and crashes headlong on the cliffs, which scream in pain against the wind.

I see this house's age-old sorrows, the house of Labdakos' children,⁶ sorrows falling on the sorrows of the dead, one generation bringing no relief to generations after it—some god strikes at them—on and on without an end. For now the light which has been shining over the last roots of Oedipus' house is being cut down with a bloody knife belonging to the gods below—for foolish talk and frenzy in the soul.

Oh Zeus, what human trespasses can check your power? Even Sleep, who casts his nets on everything, cannot master that—nor can the months, the tireless months the gods control. A sovereign who cannot grow old, you hold Olympus as your own,⁷ in all its glittering magnificence. From now on into all future time, as in the past, your law holds firm. It never enters lives of human beings in its full force without disaster.

Hope ranging far and wide brings comfort to many men—but then hope can deceive, delusions born of volatile desire. It comes upon the man who's ignorant until his foot is seared in burning fire. Someone's wisdom has revealed to us this famous saying—sometimes the gods lure a man's mind forward to disaster, and he thinks evil's something good. But then he lives only the briefest time free of catastrophe.

[The palace doors open]

CHORUS LEADER Here comes Haemon, your only living son. Is he grieving the fate of Antigone, his bride, bitter that his marriage hopes are gone?

CREON We'll soon find out—more accurately than any prophet here could indicate.

[Enter Haemon from the palace]

My son, have you heard the sentence that's been passed upon your bride? And have you now come here angry at your father? Or are you loyal to me, on my side no matter what I do?

HAEMON Father, I'm yours. For me your judgments and the ways you act on them are good—I shall follow them. I'll not consider any marriage a greater benefit than your fine leadership.

CREON Indeed, my son, that's how your heart should always be resolved, to stand behind your father's judgment on every issue. That's what men pray for—obedient children growing up at home who will pay back their father's enemies, evil to them for evil done to him, while honoring his friends as much as he does. A man who fathers useless children—what can one say of him except he's bred troubles for himself, and much to laugh at for those who fight against him? So, my son, don't ever throw good sense aside for pleasure, for some woman's sake. You understand how such embraces can turn freezing cold when an evil woman shares your life at home. What greater wound is there than a false friend? So spit this girl out—she's your enemy. Let her marry someone else in Hades. Since I caught her clearly disobeying, the only culprit in the entire city, I won't perjure myself before the state. No—I'll kill her. And so let her appeal to Zeus, the god of blood relationships. If I foster any lack of full respect in my own family, I surely do the same with those who are not linked to me by blood. The man who acts well with his household will be found a just man in the city. I'd trust such a man to govern wisely or to be content with someone ruling him. And in the

thick of battle at his post he'll stand firm beside his fellow soldier, a loyal, brave man. But anyone who's proud and violates our laws or thinks he'll tell our leaders what to do, a man like that wins no praise from me. No. We must obey whatever man the city puts in charge, no matter what the issue—great or small, just or unjust. For there's no greater evil than a lack of leadership. That destroys whole cities, turns households into ruins, and in war makes soldiers break and run away. When men succeed, what keeps their lives secure in almost every case is their obedience. That's why they must support those in control, and never let some woman beat us down. If we must fall from power, let that come at some man's hand—at least, we won't be called inferior to any woman.

CHORUS LEADER Unless we're being deceived by our old age, what you've just said seems reasonable to us.

HAEMON Father, the gods instill good sense in men—the greatest of all the things which we possess. I could not find your words somehow not right—I hope that's something I never learn to do. But other words might be good, as well. Because of who you are, you can't perceive all the things men say or do—or their complaints. Your gaze makes citizens afraid—they can't say anything you would not like to hear. But in the darkness I can hear them talk—the city is upset about the girl. They say of all women here she's least deserves the worst of deaths for her most glorious act. When in the slaughter her own brother died, she did not just leave him there unburied, to be ripped apart by carrion dogs or birds. Surely she deserves some golden honor? That's the dark secret rumor people speak. For me, father, nothing is more valuable than your well being. For any children, what could be a greater honor to them than their father's thriving reputation? A father feels the same about his sons. So don't let your mind dwell on just one thought, that what you say is right and nothing else. A man who thinks that only he is wise, that he can speak and think like no one else, when such men are exposed, then all can see their emptiness inside. For any man, even if he's wise, there's nothing shameful in learning many things, staying flexible. You notice how in winter floods the trees which bend before the storm preserve their twigs. The ones who stand against it are destroyed, root and branch. In the same way, those sailors who keep their sails stretched tight, never easing off, make their ship capsize—and from that point on sail with their rowing benches all submerged. So end your anger. Permit yourself to change. For if I, as a younger man, may state my views, I'd say it would be for the best if men by nature understood all things—if not, and that is usually the case, when men speak well, it's good to learn from them.

CHORUS LEADER My lord, if what he's said is relevant, it seems appropriate to learn from him, and you too, Haemon, listen to the king. The things which you both said were excellent.

CREON And men my age—are we then going to school to learn what's wise from men as young as him?

HAEMON There's nothing wrong in that. And if I'm young, don't think about my age—look at what I do.

CREON And what you do—does that include this, honoring those who act against our laws?

HAEMON I would not encourage anyone to show respect to evil men.

CREON And her—is she not suffering from the same disease?

HAEMON The people here in Thebes all say the same—they deny she is.

CREON So the city now will instruct me how I am to govern?

HAEMON Now you're talking like someone far too young. Don't you see that?

CREON Am I to rule this land at someone else's whim or by myself?

HAEMON A city which belongs to just one man is no true city.

CREON According to our laws, does not the ruler own the city?

HAEMON By yourself you'd make an excellent king but in a desert.

CREON It seems as if this boy is fighting on the woman's side.

HAEMON That's true—if you're the woman. I'm concerned for you.

CREON You're the worst there is—you set your judgment up against your father.

HAEMON No, not when I see you making a mistake and being unjust.

CREON Is it a mistake to honor my own rule?

HAEMON You're not honoring that by trampling on the gods' prerogatives.

CREON You foul creature—you're worse than any woman.

HAEMON You'll not catch me giving way to some disgrace.

CREON But your words all speak on her behalf.

HAEMON And yours and mine—and for the gods below.

CREON You woman's slave—don't try to win me over.

HAEMON What do you want—to speak and never hear someone reply?

CREON You'll never marry her while she's alive.

HAEMON Then she'll die—and in her death kill someone else.

CREON Are you so insolent you threaten me?

HAEMON Where's the threat in challenging a bad decree?

CREON You'll regret parading what you think like this—you—a person with an empty brain!

HAEMON If you were not my father, I might say you were not thinking straight.

CREON Would you, indeed? Well, then, by Olympus, I'll have you know you'll be sorry for demeaning me with all these insults.

[Creon turns to his attendants]

Go bring her out—that hateful creature, so she can die right here, with him present, before her bridegroom's eyes.

HAEMON No. Don't ever hope for that. She'll not die with me just standing there. And as for you—your eyes will never see my face again. So let your rage charge on among your friends who want to stand by you in this.

[Exit Haemon, running back into the palace]

CHORUS LEADER My lord, Haemon left in such a hurry. He's angry—in a young man at his age the mind turns bitter when he's feeling hurt.

CREON Let him dream up or carry out great deeds beyond the power of man, he'll not save these girls—their fate is sealed.

CHORUS LEADER Are you going to kill them both?

CREON No—not the one whose hands are clean. You're right.

CHORUS LEADER How do you plan to kill Antigone?

CREON I'll take her on a path no people use, and hide her in a cavern in the rocks, while still alive. I'll set out provisions, as much as piety requires, to make sure the city is not totally corrupted.⁸ Then she can speak her prayers to Hades, the only god she worships, for success avoiding death—or else, at least, she'll learn, although too late, how it's a waste of time to work to honor those whom Hades holds.

CHORUS O Eros, the conqueror in every fight,⁹ Eros, who squanders all men's wealth, who sleeps at night on girls' soft cheeks, and roams across the ocean seas and through the shepherd's hut—no immortal god escapes from you, nor any man, who lives but for a day. And the one whom you possess goes mad. Even in good men you twist their minds, perverting them to their own ruin. You provoke these men to family strife. The bride's desire seen glittering in her eyes—that conquers everything, its power enthroned beside eternal laws, for there the goddess Aphrodite works her will, whose ways are irresistible.¹⁰

[Antigone enters from the palace with attendants who are taking her away to her execution]

CHORAL LEADER When I look at her I forget my place. I lose restraint and can't hold back my tears—Antigone going to her bridal room where all are laid to rest in death.

ANTIGONE Look at me, my native citizens, as I go on my final journey, as I gaze upon the sunlight one last

time, which I'll never see again—for Hades, who brings all people to their final sleep, leads me on, while I'm still living, down to the shores of Acheron.¹¹ I've not yet had my bridal chant, nor has any wedding song been sung—for my marriage is to Acheron.

CHORUS Surely you carry fame with you and praise, as you move to the deep home of the dead. You were not stricken by lethal disease or paid your wages with a sword. No. You were in charge of your own fate. So of all living human beings, you alone make your way down to Hades still alive.

ANTIGONE I've heard about a guest of ours, daughter of Tantalus, from Phrygia—she went to an excruciating death in Sipylus, right on the mountain peak. The stone there, just like clinging ivy, wore her down, and now, so people say, the snow and rain never leave her there, as she laments. Below her weeping eyes her neck is wet with tears. God brings me to a final rest which most resembles hers.

CHORUS But Niobe was a goddess, born divine—and we are human beings, a race which dies. But still, it's a fine thing for a woman, once she's dead, to have it said she shared, in life and death, the fate of demigods.¹²

ANTIGONE Oh, you are mocking me! Why me—by our fathers' gods—why do you all, my own city and the richest men of Thebes, insult me now right to my face, without waiting for my death? Well at least I have Dirce's springs, the holy grounds of Thebes, a city full of splendid chariots, to witness how no friends lament for me as I move on—you see the laws which lead me to my rock-bound prison, a tomb made just for me. Alas! In my wretchedness I have no home, not with human beings or corpses, not with the living or the dead.

CHORUS You pushed your daring to the limit, my child, and tripped against Justice's high altar—perhaps your agonies are paying back some compensation for your father.¹³

ANTIGONE Now there you touch on my most painful thought—my father's destiny—always on my mind, along with that whole fate which sticks to us, the splendid house of Labdakos—the curse arising from a mother's marriage bed, when she had sex with her own son, my father. From what kind of parents was I born, their wretched daughter? I go to them, unmarried and accursed, an outcast. Alas, too, for my brother Polyneices, who made a fatal marriage and then died—and with that death killed me while still alive.¹⁴

CHORUS To be piously devout shows reverence, but powerful men, who in their persons incorporate authority, cannot bear anyone to break their rules. Hence, you die because of your own selfish will.

ANTIGONE Without lament, without a friend, and with no marriage song, I'm being led in this miserable state, along my final road. So wretched that I no longer have the right to look upon the sun, that sa-

cred eye. But my fate prompts no tears, and no friend mourns.

CREON Don't you know that no one faced with death would ever stop the singing and the groans, if that would help? Take her and shut her up, as I have ordered, in her tomb's embrace. And get it done as quickly as you can. Then leave her there alone, all by herself—she can sort out whether she wants suicide or remains alive, buried in a place like that. As far as she's concerned, we bear no guilt. But she's lost her place living here with us.¹⁵

ANTIGONE Oh my tomb and bridal chamber—my eternal hollow dwelling place, where I go to join my people. Most of them have perished—Persephone has welcomed them among the dead.¹⁶ I'm the last one, dying here the most evil death by far, as I move down before the time allotted for my life is done. But I go nourishing the vital hope my father will be pleased to see me come, and you, too, my mother, will welcome me, as well as you, my own dear brother. When you died, with my own hands I washed you. I arranged your corpse and at the grave mound poured out libations. But now, Polyneices, this is my reward for covering your corpse.¹⁷ However, for wise people I was right to honor you. I'd never have done it for children of my own, not as their mother, nor for a dead husband lying in decay—no, not in defiance of the citizens. What law do I appeal to, claiming this? If my husband died, there'd be another one, and if I were to lose a child of mine I'd have another with some other man. But since my father and my mother, too, are hidden away in Hades' house, I'll never have another living brother. That was the law I used to honor you. But Creon thought that I was in the wrong and acting recklessly for you, my brother. Now he seizes me by force and leads me here—no wedding and no bridal song, no share in married life or raising children. Instead I go in sorrow to my grave, without my friends, to die while still alive. What holy justice have I violated? In my wretchedness, why should I still look up to the gods? Which one can I invoke to bring me help, when for my reverence they charge me with impiety? Well, then, if this is something fine among the gods, I'll come to recognize that I've done wrong. But if these people here are being unjust may they endure no greater punishment than the injustices they're doing to me.

CHORUS LEADER The same storm blasts continue to attack the mind in this young girl.

CREON Then those escorting her will be sorry they're so slow.

ANTIGONE Alas, then, those words mean death is very near at hand.

CREON I won't encourage you or cheer you up, by saying the sentence won't be carried out.

ANTIGONE O city of my fathers in this land of Thebes—and my ancestral gods, I am being led away. No more delaying for me. Look on me, you lords of Thebes, the last survivor of your royal house, see

what I have to undergo, the kind of men who do this to me, for paying reverence to true piety.

[Antigone is led away under escort]

CHORUS In her brass-bound room fair Danae has well endured her separation from the heaven's light, a prisoner hidden in a chamber like a tomb, although she, too, came from a noble line.¹⁸ And she, my child, had in her care the liquid streaming golden seed of Zeus. But the power of fate is full of mystery. There's no evading it, no, not with wealth, or war, or walls, or black sea-beaten ships.

And the hot-tempered child of Dryas, king of the Edonians, was put in prison, closed up in the rocks by Dionysus, for his angry mocking of the god.¹⁹ There the dreadful flower of his rage slowly withered, and he came to know the god who in his frenzy he had mocked with his own tongue. For he had tried to hold in check women in that frenzy inspired by the god, the Bacchanalian fire. More than that—he'd made the Muses angry, challenging the gods who love the flute.²⁰

Beside the black rocks where the twin seas meet, by Thracian Salmydessos at the Bosphorus,²¹ close to the place where Ares dwells, the war god witnessed the unholy wounds which blinded the two sons of Phineus, inflicted by his savage wife—the sightless holes cried out for someone to avenge those blows made with her sharpened comb in blood-stained hands.²²

In their misery they wept, lamenting their wretched suffering, sons of a mother whose marriage had gone wrong. And yet, she was an offspring of an ancient family, the race of Erechtheus, raised far away, in caves surrounded by her father's winds, Boreas' child, a girl who raced with horses across steep hills—child of the gods. But she, too, my child, suffered much from the immortal Fates.²³

[Enter Teiresias, led by a young boy]

TEIRESIAS Lords of Thebes, we two have walked a common path, one person's vision serving both of us. The blind require a guide to find their way.

CREON What news do you have, old Teiresias?

TEIRESIAS I'll tell you—and you obey the prophet.

CREON I've not rejected your advice before.

TEIRESIAS That's the reason why you've steered the city on its proper course.

CREON From my experience I can confirm the help you give.

TEIRESIAS Then know this—your luck is once more on fate's razor edge.

CREON What? What you've just said makes me nervous.

TEIRESIAS You'll know—once you hear the tokens of my art. As I was sitting in my ancient place receiving omens from the flights of birds who all come there where I can hear them, I note among those birds an unknown cry—evil, unintelligible, angry

screaming. I knew that they were tearing at each other with murderous claws. The noisy wings revealed that all too well. I was afraid. So right away up on the blazing altar I set up burnt offerings. But Hephaestus failed to shine out from the sacrifice—dark slime poured out onto the embers, oozing from the thighs, which smoked and spat, bile was sprayed high up into the air, and the melting thighs lost all the fat which they'd been wrapped in. The rites had failed—there was no prophecy revealed in them. I learned that from this boy, who is my guide, as I guide other men.²⁴ Our state is sick—your policies have done this. In the city our altars and our hearths have been defiled, all of them, with rotting flesh brought there by birds and dogs from Oedipus' son, who lies there miserably dead. The gods no longer will accept our sacrifice, our prayers, our thigh bones burned in fire. No bird will shriek out a clear sign to us, for they have gorged themselves on fat and blood from a man who's dead. Consider this, my son. All men make mistakes—that's not uncommon. But when they do, they're no longer foolish or subject to bad luck if they try to fix the evil into which they've fallen, once they give up their intransigence. Men who put their stubbornness on show invite accusations of stupidity. Make concessions to the dead—don't ever stab a man who's just been killed. What's the glory in killing a dead person one more time? I've been concerned for you. It's good advice. Learning can be pleasant when a man speaks well, especially when he seeks your benefit.

CREON Old man, you're all like archers shooting at me. For you all I've now become your target—even prophets have been aiming at me. I've long been bought and sold as merchandise among that tribe. Well, go make your profits. If it's what you want, then trade with Sardis for their golden-silver alloy—or for gold from India, but you'll never hide that corpse in any grave. Even if Zeus' eagles should choose to seize his festering body and take it up, right to the throne of Zeus, not even then would I, in trembling fear of some defilement, permit that corpse a burial. For I know well that no man has the power to pollute the gods. But, old Teiresias, among human beings the wisest suffer a disgraceful fall when, to promote themselves, they use fine words to spread around abusive insults.

TEIRESIAS Alas, does any man know or think about...

CREON [interrupting] Think what? What sort of pithy common thought are you about to utter?

TEIRESIAS [ignoring the interruption]...how good advice is valuable—worth more than all possessions.

CREON I think that's true, as much as foolishness is what harms us most.

TEIRESIAS Yet that's the sickness now infecting you.

CREON I have no desire to denigrate a prophet when I speak.

TEIRESIAS But that's what you are doing, when you claim my oracles are false.

CREON The tribe of prophets—all of them—are fond of money.

TEIRESIAS And kings? Their tribe loves to benefit dishonestly.

CREON You know you're speaking of the man who rules you.

TEIRESIAS I know—thanks to me you saved the city and now are in control.²⁵

CREON You're a wise prophet, but you love doing wrong.

TEIRESIAS You'll force me to speak of secrets locked inside my heart.

CREON Do it—just don't speak to benefit yourself.

TEIRESIAS I don't think that I'll be doing that—not as far as you're concerned.

CREON You can be sure you won't change my mind to make yourself more rich.

TEIRESIAS Then understand this well—you will not see the sun race through its cycle many times before you lose a child of your own loins, a corpse in payment for these corpses. You've thrown down to those below someone from up above—in your arrogance you've moved a living soul into a grave, leaving here a body owned by gods below—unburied, dispossessed, unsanctified. That's no concern of yours or gods above. In this you violate the ones below. And so destroying avengers wait for you, Furies of Hades and the gods, who'll see you caught up in this very wickedness. Now see if I speak as someone who's been bribed. It won't be long before in your own house the men and women all cry out in sorrow, and cities rise in hate against you—all those whose mangled soldiers have had burial rites from dogs, wild animals, or flying birds who carry the unholy stench back home, to every city hearth.²⁶ Like an archer, I shoot these arrows now into your heart because you have provoked me. I'm angry—so my aim is good. You'll not escape their pain. Boy, lead us home so he can vent his rage on younger men and keep a quieter tongue and a more temperate mind than he has now.

[Exit Teiresias, led by the young boy]

CHORUS LEADER My lord, my lord, such dreadful prophecies—and now he's gone. Since my hair changed color from black to white, I know here in the city he's never uttered a false prophecy.

CREON I know that, too—and it disturbs my mind. It's dreadful to give way, but to resist and let destruction hammer down my spirit—that's a fearful option, too.

CHORUS LEADER Son of Menoikeos, you need to listen to some good advice.

CREON Tell me what to do. Speak up. I'll do it.

CHORUS LEADER Go and release the girl from her rock tomb. Then prepare a grave for that unburied corpse.

CREON This is your advice? You think I should concede?

CHORUS LEADER Yes, my lord, as fast as possible. Swift footed injuries sent from the gods hack down those who act imprudently.

CREON Alas—it's difficult. But I'll give up. I'll not do what I'd set my heart upon. It's not right to fight against necessity.

CHORUS LEADER Go now and get this done. Don't give the work to other men to do.

CREON I'll go just as I am. Come, you servants, each and every one of you. Come on. Bring axes with you. Go there quickly—up to the higher ground. I've changed my mind. Since I'm the one who tied her up, I'll go and set her free myself. Now I'm afraid. Until one dies the best thing well may be to follow our established laws.

[Creon and his attendants hurry off stage]

CHORUS Oh you with many names, you glory of that Theban bride, and child of thundering Zeus, you who cherish famous Italy, and rule the welcoming valley lands of Eleusianian Deo— O Bacchus—you who dwell in the bacchants' mother city Thebes, beside Ismenus' flowing streams, on land sown with the teeth of that fierce dragon.²⁷

Above the double mountain peaks, the torches flashing through the murky smoke have seen you where Corcyian nymphs move on as they worship you by the Kastalian stream. And from the ivy-covered slopes of Nysa's hills, from the green shore so rich in vines, you come to us, visiting our Theban ways, while deathless voices all cry out in honor of your name, "Evoe."²⁸

You honor Thebes, our city, above all others, you and your mother blasted by that lightning strike.²⁹ And now when all our people here are captive to a foul disease, on your healing feet you come across the moaning strait or over the Parnassian hill.

You who lead the dance, among the fire-breathing stars, who guard the voices in the night, child born of Zeus, oh my lord, appear with your attendant Thyiads, who dance in frenzy all night long, for you their patron, Iacchus.³⁰

[Enter a Messenger]

MESSENGER All you here who live beside the home of Amphion and Cadmus—in human life there's no set place which I would praise or blame.³¹ The lucky and unlucky rise or fall by chance day after day—and how these things are fixed for men no one can prophesy. For Creon, in my view, was once a man we all looked up to. For he saved the state, this land of Cadmus, from its enemies. He took control and reigned as its sole king—and prospered with the birth of noble children. Now all is gone. For when a man has lost what gives him pleasure, I don't include him among the living—he's a breathing corpse. Pile up a massive fortune in your home, if that's what

you want—live like a king. If there's no pleasure in it, I'd not give to any man a vapor's shadow for it, not compared to human joy.

CHORUS LEADER Have you come with news of some fresh trouble in our house of kings?

MESSENGER They're dead—and those alive bear the responsibility for those who've died.

CHORUS LEADER Who did the killing? Who's lying dead? Tell us.

MESSENGER Haemon has been killed. No stranger shed his blood.

CHORUS LEADER At his father's hand? Or did he kill himself?

MESSENGER By his own hand— angry at his father for the murder.

CHORUS LEADER Teiresias, how your words have proven true!

MESSENGER That's how things stand. Consider what comes next.

CHORUS LEADER I see Creon's wife, poor Eurydice—she's coming from the house—either by chance, or else she's heard there's news about her son.

[Enter Eurydice from the palace with some attendants]

EURYDICE Citizens of Thebes, I heard you talking, as I was walking out, going off to pray, to ask for help from goddess Pallas. While I was unfastening the gate, I heard someone speaking of bad news about my family. I was terrified. I collapsed, fainting back into the arms of my attendants. So tell the news again—I'll listen. I'm no stranger to misfortune.

MESSENGER Dear lady, I'll speak of what I saw, omitting not one detail of the truth. Why should I ease your mind with a report which turns out later to be incorrect? The truth is always best. I went to the plain, accompanying your husband as his guide. Polyneices' corpse, still unlamented, was lying there, the greatest distance off, torn apart by dogs. We prayed to Pluto and to Hecate, goddess of the road, for their good will and to restrain their rage. We gave the corpse a ritual wash, and burned what was left of it on fresh-cut branches. We piled up a high tomb of his native earth. Then we moved to the young girl's rocky cave, the hollow cavern of that bride of death. From far away one man heard a voice coming from the chamber where we'd put her without a funeral—a piercing cry. He went to tell our master Creon, who, as he approached the place, heard the sound, an unintelligible scream of sorrow. He groaned and then spoke out these bitter words, "Has misery made me a prophet now? And am I traveling along a road that takes me to the worst of all disasters? I've just heard the voice of my own son. You servants, go ahead—get up there fast. Remove the stones piled in the entrance way, then stand beside the tomb and look in there to see if that was Haemon's voice I heard, or if the gods have been deceiving me." Following what our desperate master asked, we looked.

In the furthest corner of the tomb we saw Antigone hanging by the neck, held up in a noose—fine woven linen. Haemon had his arms around her waist—he was embracing her and crying out in sorrow for the loss of his own bride, now among the dead, his father’s work, and for his horrifying marriage bed. Creon saw him, let out a fearful groan, then went inside and called out anxiously, “You unhappy boy, what have you done? What are you thinking? Have you lost your mind? Come out, my child—I’m begging you—please come.” But the boy just stared at him with savage eyes, spat in his face and, without saying a word, drew his two-edged sword. Creon moved away, so the boy’s blow failed to strike his father. Angry at himself, the ill-fated lad right then and there leaned into his own sword, driving half the blade between his ribs. While still conscious he embraced the girl in his weak arms, and, as he breathed his last, he coughed up streams of blood on her fair cheek. Now he lies there, corpse on corpse, his marriage has been fulfilled in chambers of the dead. The unfortunate boy has shown all men how, of all the evils which afflict mankind, the most disastrous one is thoughtlessness.

[Eurydice turns and slowly returns into the palace]

CHORUS LEADER What do you make of that?
The queen’s gone back. She left without a word,
good or bad.

MESENTER I’m surprised myself. It’s about her son—
she heard that terrible report. I hope she’s gone
because she doesn’t think it right to mourn for him
in public. In the home, surrounded by her servants,
she’ll arrange a period of mourning for the house.
She’s discreet and has experience—she won’t make
mistakes.

CHORUS LEADER I’m not sure of that. To me
her staying silent was extreme—it seems to point
to something ominous, just like a vain excess of
grief.

MESENTER I’ll go in. We’ll find out if she’s hiding
something secret, deep within her passionate heart.
You’re right—excessive silence can be dangerous.

[The Messenger goes up the stairs into the palace. Enter Creon from the side, with attendants. Creon is holding the body of Haemon]

CHORUS LEADER Here comes the king in per-
son—carrying in his arms, if it’s right to speak of
this, a clear reminder that this evil comes not from
some stranger, but his own mistakes.

CREON ...mistakes made by a foolish mind, cruel
mistakes that bring on death. You see us here, all in
one family—the killer and the killed. Oh the profan-
ity of what I planned. Alas, my son, you died so young
— a death before your time ...you’re dead ... gone
—not your own foolishness but mine.

CHORUS LEADER Alas, it seems you’ve learned
to see what’s right—but far too late.

CREON ... I’ve learned it in my pain. Some god
clutching a great weight struck my head, then hurled
me onto paths in wilderness, throwing down and
casting underfoot what brought me joy. So sad ... so
sad ... the wretched agony of human life.

[The Messenger reappears from the palace]

MESENTER My lord, you come like one who stores
up evil, what you hold in your arms and what you’ll
see before too long inside the house.

CREON What’s that? Is there something still more
evil than all this?

MESENTER Your wife is dead—blood mother of that
corpse—slaughtered with a sword—her wounds
are very new, poor lady.

CREON ...a gathering place for death ... no sacri-
fice can bring this to an end. Why are you destroying
me? You there—you bringer of this dreadful news,
this agony, what are you saying now? ... You kill a
man then kill him once again. What are you saying,
boy? What news? A slaughter heaped on slaughter—
my wife, alas ... she’s dead?

MESENTER *[opening the palace doors, revealing the
body of Eurydice]* Look here. No longer is she con-
cealed inside.

CREON Alas, how miserable I feel—to look upon
this second horror. What remains for me, what’s fate
still got in store? I’ve just held my own son in my
arms, and now I see right here in front of me ano-
ther corpse. Alas for this suffering mother. Alas, my
son.

MESENTER Stabbed with a sharp sword at the altar,
she let her darkening eyesight fail, once she had
cried out in sorrow for the glorious fate of Megare-
os, who died some time ago, and then again for
Haemon, and then, with her last breath, she called
out evil things against you, the killer of your sons.³²

CREON My fear now makes me tremble. Why
won’t someone now strike out at me, pierce my
heart with a double bladed sword? How miserable I
am ... how full of misery and pain ...

MESENTER By this woman who lies dead you stand
charged with the deaths of both your sons.

CREON What about her? How did she die so vio-
lently?

MESENTER She killed herself, with her own hands she
stabbed her belly, once she heard her son’s unhappy
fate.

CREON Alas for me ... the guilt for all of this is
mine—it can never be removed from me or passed
to any other mortal man. I, and I alone ... I mur-
dered you ... I speak the truth. Servants—hurry and
lead me off, get me away from here, for now what I
am in life is nothing.

CHORUS LEADER What you advise is good—if
good can come with all these evils. When we face
such things the less we say the better.

CREON Let that day come, oh let it come, the
fairest of all destinies for me, the one which brings

on my last day. Oh, let it come, so that I never see another dawn.

CHORUS LEADER That's something for the times ahead. Now we need to deal with what confronts us here. What's yet to come is the concern of those whose task it is to deal with it.

CREON In that prayer I included everything I most desire.

CHORUS Pray for nothing. There's no release for mortal human beings, not from events which destiny has set.

CREON Then take this foolish man away from here. I killed you, my son, without intending to, and you, as well, my wife. How useless I am now. I don't know where to look or find support. Everything I touch goes wrong, and on my head fate climbs up with its overwhelming load.

[The Attendants help Creon move up the stairs into the palace, taking Haemon's body with them]

CHORUS The most important part of true success is wisdom—not to act impiously towards the gods, for boasts of arrogant men bring on great blows of punishment—so in old age men can discover wisdom.



Notes

- 1 Dirce: one of the rivers beside Thebes.
- 2 Hephaistos: god of fire.
- 3 Laius: king of Thebes and father of Oedipus. Oedipus killed him (not knowing who he was) and became the next king of Thebes by saving the city from the devastation of the Sphinx.
- 4 Zeus Herkeios: Zeus of the Courtyard, a patron god of worship within the home.
- 5 Hades: god of the underworld, lord of the dead.
- 6 Labdakos: father of Laius and hence grandfather of Oedipus and great-grandfather of Antigone and Ismene.
- 7 Olympus: a mountain in northern Greece where, according to tradition, the major gods live.
- 8 corrupted: the killing of a family member could bring on divine punishment in the form of a pollution involving the entire city (as in the case of Oedipus). Creon is, one assumes, taking refuge in the notion that he will not be executing Antigone directly.
- 9 Eros: the god of erotic sexual passion.
- 10 Aphrodite: goddess of sexual desire.
- 11 Acheron: one of the major rivers of the underworld.
- 12 The last two speeches refer to Niobe, daughter of Tantalus (a son of Zeus). Niobe had seven sons and daughters and boasted that she had more children than the goddess Leto. As punishment Artemis and Apollo, Leto's two children, destroyed all Niobe's children. Niobe turned to stone in grief and was reportedly visible on Mount Sipylus (in Asia Minor). The Chorus' claim that Niobe was a goddess or semi-divine is very odd here, since her story is almost always a tale of human presumption and divine punishment for human arrogance.
- 13 father: The Chorus here is offering the traditional suggestion that present afflictions can arise from a family curse originating in previous generations.
- 14 still alive: Polyneices married the daughter of Adrastus, an action which enabled him to acquire the army to attack Thebes.
- 15 here with us: Creon's logic seems to suggest that because he is not executing Antigone directly and is leaving her a choice between committing suicide and slowly starving to death in the cave, he has no moral responsibility for what happens.
- 16 Persephone is the wife of Hades and thus goddess of the underworld.
- 17 In these lines Antigone seems to be talking about both her brothers, first claiming she washed and dressed the body of Eteocles and then covered Polyneices. However, the pronoun references in the Greek are confusing. The Greek text has prompted a great deal of critical debate, since it seems incompatible with Antigone's earlier motivation and does not make much sense in context. Hence, some editors insist that the lines (or most of them) be removed.
- 18 Danae: daughter of Acrisus, King of Argos. Because of a prophecy that he would be killed by a son born to Danae, Acrisus imprisoned her. But Zeus made love to her in the form of a golden shower, and she gave birth to Perseus, who, once grown, killed Acrisus accidentally.
- 19 mocking of the god: a reference to Lycurgus son of Dryas, a Thracian king. He attacked the god Dionysus and was punished with blinding or with being torn apart.
- 20 flute: the anger of the Muses at a Thracian who boasted of his flute playing is not normally a part of the Lycurgus story but refers to another Thracian, Thamyras.
- 21 dark rocks ... Bosphorus: the dark rocks were a famous hazard to shipping. They moved together to smash any ship moving between them. The Bosphorus is the strait between the Black Sea and the Propontis (near the Hellespont).
- 22 blood-stained hands: this verse and the next refer to the Thracian king Phineas, whose second wife blinded her two step sons (from Phineas' first wife Cleopatra) by stabbing out their eyes.
- 23 immortal Fates: Cleopatra was the grand-daughter of Erechtheus, king of Athens. Boreas, father of Erechtheus, was god of the North Wind.
- 24 other men: Teiresias' offering failed to catch fire. His interpretation is that it has been rejected by the gods, a very unfavorable omen.
- 25 in control: This is the second reference to the fact that at some point earlier Teiresias has given important political help to Creon. It is not at all clear what this refers to.
- 26 Teiresias here is apparently accusing Creon of refusing burial to the dead allied soldiers Polyneices brought with him from other cities. There is no mention of this anywhere else in the play, although the detail is present in other versions of the story.
- 27 fierce dragon: In these lines the Chorus celebrates Dionysus, the god born in Thebes to Semele, daughter of King Cadmus. The bacchants are those who worship Dionysus. Eleusis, a region on the coast near Athens, was famous for the its Eleusinian Mysteries, a secret ritual of worship. Deo is a reference to the goddess Demeter, who was worshipped at Eleusis. The Theban race sprang up from dragon's teeth sown in a field by Cadmus, founder of the city.
- 28 Evox: a cry of celebration made by worshippers of Bacchus.
- 29 lightning strike: Semele, Dionysus human mother, was destroyed by Zeus' lightning bolt, because of the jealousy of Hera, Zeus' wife.
- 30 Iacchus: Thyiads are worshippers of Dionysus, Iacchus a divinity associated with Dionysus.
- 31 Amphion: legendary king of Thebes, husband of Niobe.
- 32 Megareos: Haemon's brother, who, we are to understand on the basis of this reference, died nobly some time before the play begins. It is not clear how Creon might have been responsible for his death. In another version of the story, Creon has a son Menoeceus, who kills himself in order to save the city.

